

This morning, encouragement is our word. Its importance is huge. The psalms are amongst the most eloquent, encouraging literature ever written, and none more so than Psalm 139. This psalm is often perceived as a psalm about God’s judgment- that is, his concern with who is keeping rules and who is not. However, this is a psalm about God’s deep intimacy with and encouragement of every person.

So as we read it together, think of it in the spirit of God’s closeness and encouragement to each one of us.    (Psalm 139:1-12)

This is a God who cares so deeply, that none of us is ever abandoned or given up on, no matter where we go, whatever we’ve done, and where we have fled. There is nowhere we can go that God will not patiently, lovingly follow and be a comforting, reassuring, encouraging, and even challenging presence.

Most of us don’t think of ourselves as hiding from God. It’s just that we stay so busy we’re not aware of all that God does for us. We live at such an incredibly fast pace. Life is full, appointments all day long, places to go, people to see, schedules to keep. Americans tend to fill up every moment with activity so that the normal, less busy moments- mealtimes, for instance- also succumb to the rush. We eat “fast food” on the run. A psychotherapist writes, “Many of us are juggling so many things that we are run by our lives rather than living them as gifts from God. What if we could learn to stop for a moment many times a day? What if in those moments we could decide to notice the sheer miracle of being alive? We would then be taking “awe” breaks instead of coffee breaks.” (Gunilla Norris, “The Heart of Responsibility,” *Weavings*, July/august 2008).

What the psalmist reminds us, in fact what the bible proclaims throughout its revelation, is that *God accompanies us every step we take*, and encourages us in the daulyness of life. If we weren’t so distracted, our spirits would be more aware of and lifted by God’s gifts in the intricate wonder of a summer flower, in the mysterious vastness of a starry night, in a three-year-olds curiosity and energy, in the smile of a stranger, the touch of a beloved...*God here in the earthiness of life*. There is all of this, and infinitely more, revealing God’s presence all around us, and in his presence, encouraging us to live life with fearless joy.

These timeless words bid us to pay attention, to slow down and see, and to take “awe” breaks every day in order to be strengthened and encouraged by God’s touch.

The psalmist’s words promise the most important thing I can think of... “*I will be with you and keep you wherever you go.*”

“Where can I go from your spirit?” the psalmist asked. Clearly understand that his question was not one of complaint, but of great thankfulness. He was so encouraged that even if he wanted to leave God behind, it isn’t possible. “Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there: If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand hold me fast.” The psalmist is proclaiming the astounding presence of God, saying: “I will be with you and keep you wherever you go- and I will bring you home.”

Centuries after the psalmist, a child was born whose name was Emmanuel, God with us. We believe that child, the man the child became, was indeed God among us, living our life, growing into adulthood as we do, experiencing everything- the joys and hopes and

disappointments, the high energy of life and times of weariness...that he, “God with us,” suffered as we do and died our very death- and rose again. We believe that he, Jesus Christ, is the fulfillment of the ancient promise, that because of him we are never alone. And in this trust we better understand St. Paul’s words read earlier, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” What greater encouragement than this!

God’s encouragement of us is unceasing. Yet, with all this said, there is yet an amazing rest of the story. I can think of nothing we can beat God at except this: our amazing powers to encourage one another. Or is it more accurate to say, God works his best encouragement to others through us.

Every person hearing this message today needs encouragement, even those of us residing in affluent suburbs with money and nice places to live. Whatever our age or circumstance, we all need that lift that comes from someone who cares.

The very smallest offering of encouragement can mean so much. On the light side...A family traveling with their cat, Marilyn, usually stayed at hotels that allow pets. But, late one night on a road trip, they found themselves at an establishment that forbade animals. Sneaking Marilyn past the front desk was no problem. However, the next morning when they put her in a cardboard box, she began to meow.

On the crowded elevator, Murray coughed loudly to cover the sound of the cat. Everyone politely ignored the meows coming from the box. When the elevator doors opened before the busy front desk, Murray marched out bravely, praying that Marilyn would shut up.

He needn’t have worried. His fellow passengers marched with him, coughing loudly all the way through the lobby and out the door.

Isn’t it wonderful to have the support of other people?

Much more important than this cute story...when we are weakening... when we hurt... when our faith in God, life and ourselves is slipping... you and I have the amazing power to affect and even change the slippage. Encouragement, sincerely given, can be life changing. It may be a few sincere words... perhaps a hug... or no words at all... just being there and holding on. We are lifted by another’s belief in us. Often, we trust others belief in us more than our own. Whether with heartfelt help or a kind note, encouragement can keep us going- sometimes years after we first received it. Just a few words of encouragement, sincerely given, can be life changing...such power they have... and here’s the kicker...each one of us is fully equipped to give them. The encourager needs no special talent, skills, fancy words, time or strength, just the will to take a few moments, even seconds, to lift another. I know no other action for good that requires so little effort... so much from so little.

My best illustration of this comes from my own experience. .... In my youth, I did poorly in school. In high school, I labored hard to make c’s. I probably would have flunked out of Stevenson.

In my senior year, along with everyone else, I took college preparatory tests (I forget what they were called then), and was advised, based on those tests, not to go on to college, but to learn a trade, something I could do with my hands, like masonry or mechanics. This seemed spot on because I worked in my dad’s service station throughout my high school years, and knew well how to grease and tune-up cars. I was good at minor mechanics. That’s how we made our living.

My parents, neither with college educations, so badly wanted me to go to college, wishing a better life for me. So, I spent a day at the University of Tulsa, taking the pre-entrance exam. Miraculously I passed.

At the end of my freshman year, however, I had a C minus average, and decided to see my personal advisor, Grady Snuggs, to tell him I would be dropping out, and moving on with work I probably should have pursued in the first place. Snuggs was head of the religion and philosophy school. Tulsa U. is a Presbyterian school, and every student, including engineers, had to take Snugg's four-hour class on the life and teachings of Jesus. I took the course and made a D.

In my visit with Dr. Snuggs, I began by apologizing for doing so poorly in his class, upon which he informed me that I actually flunked the course, but he gave me a D because he thought I tried. (Obviously, things were going from bad to worse.) But then, Snuggs said the most amazing thing...words I had never heard before.

Dr. Snuggs said to me: "Nelson, I don't think your grades are a result of not having the brain power, but the result of not using what you have. I think you're a smart guy but don't know it." He then encouraged me to stay on at least another semester, apply myself, and see if things changed.

Wow! I had never heard words like that- never. I cannot overstate what they meant to me. I took his counsel and went on to graduate with a 3.6...making almost straight A's. From there I went to graduate school and in master's work graduated second to a colleague who went on to become president of Phillips University.

Now, you may be thinking that I've told this story to show you how brilliant I am. (Of course, the truth is the truth.) But, truly, I share my story to emphasize the power of one person's encouragement, and how 29 words changed my life, not in career achievements of any kind, but because of how those amazing words opened me to the world of my inner life and abilities. The story is no exaggeration. It's just as I've told you. Without those 29 words, I definitely would not be standing here now, but servicing your car at Libertyville Toyota. (After the service, please no one tell me I should have stayed with mechanics.)

There's an end to my story that's so interesting. Because of excelling in my studies, I became quite close to Dr. Snuggs. (He was later to become the godfather of my first daughter.) Several weeks before graduation, I was sitting in Dr. Snuggs office, having a wonderful time, and asked: "Dr. Snuggs, do you remember that visit we had in this office three years ago when you encouraged me not give up, but keep on trying...that you thought I had the smarts to do it?" Snuggs replied, I remember well, and to tell the truth, I must confess, I didn't really think it was true. It just seemed the right thing to say."

Needless to say, this taught Dr. Snuggs something that he took very seriously from that day on.

And, needless to say, it taught me something I've never forgot. Each day, I remain alert to every possible way to share words that may encourage others to believe in themselves, trust God, and give life the best they've got.

Who have you encouraged recently?

With God always at your side, as the psalmist says, "accompanied, embraced and held in his love," never let an opportunity to encourage someone pass you by. Amen.